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Q2(c)

Elitist theory of democracy denies the possibility of democracy as 'rule of the people'. Elucidate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy

Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy - representative, participatory and deliberative.

Core demand of the question

- Elitist theory of democracy denies the possibility of democracy as 'rule of the people'. Elucidate. (15 marks)

Revision summary

Elitist theory holds that a minority always rules, so democracy cannot mean the people governing themselves.

Mosca, Pareto, and **Michels** state minority organisation and the iron law of oligarchy.

Schumpeter keeps democracy only as a method of elite competition.

Dahl's polyarchy and the 73rd Amendment's gram sabha try to disperse, not abolish, elite rule.

The denial is of **Rousseau**'s identity of people and sovereign, not always of elections.

Introduction

Classical elitists argued that every political society is ruled by a minority. If that is so, democracy cannot be the people ruling. It can only be a method for circulating elites or for getting the people's consent to those who actually rule.

Body

The elitist core

- **Gaetano Mosca** wrote of a ruling class that organises and a majority that is organised. Formulae of legitimacy change; minority rule does not.
- **Vilfredo Pareto** described circulation of elites: lions and foxes replace each other. Residues and derivations explain why the many obey.
- **Robert Michels** stated the iron law of oligarchy: organisation, even in socialist parties, produces a leadership distinct from the rank and file.
- **Joseph Schumpeter** redefined democracy as competition of elites for the people's vote. The voter does not rule. The voter chooses who will.

Why 'rule of the people' is denied

- **Rousseau**'s general will and the textbook of popular sovereignty assume a people that can be the author of law. Elitists say scale, organisation, and expertise make that a myth.

- **C. Wright Mills** later named a power elite of military, corporate, and political chiefs in the United States.
- **Dahl** answered with polyarchy: multiple minorities, open contestation, and inclusive participation, which is still not identity of ruler and ruled.
- **Lukes** and **Foucault** deepen the denial: agenda-setting and discipline mean that even electoral majorities may not know what is done in their name.

What remains of democracy

- Elitism does not always preach dictatorship. **Schumpeter** keeps civil liberties as conditions of elite competition.
- **Ambedkar** feared that without social democracy, political democracy would be a hollow form, which is a different denial: the people are split by caste, not only by organisation.
- Participatory and deliberative replies, from **Carole Pateman** to gram sabhas after the **73rd Amendment**, try to thicken rule of the people at the local scale.
- **The accurate elucidation is:** elitist theory denies identity of the people and the government. It need not deny elections. It denies **Rousseau's** meaning of democracy.

Flow diagram

Elitist theory -> Mosca ruling class
 Elitist theory -> Pareto circulation
 Elitist theory -> Michels oligarchy
 Elitist theory -> Schumpeter elite competition
 Rule of the people -> Denied as identity

Conclusion

Mosca, **Pareto**, **Michels**, and **Schumpeter** replace rule of the people with rule of organised minorities, at best chosen by the people. Polyarchy and local participation qualify the iron law. They do not restore the classical identity of ruler and ruled.

Facts & figures

Michels

Political Parties (1911) deduced oligarchy from organisation in the German Social Democrats.

Schumpeter

Capitalism, **Socialism and Democracy (1942)** defined democracy as competitive struggle for the people's vote.

Mosca

The ruling class is the organised minority; the majority is the unorganised many.

Dahl

Polyarchy is rule by many minorities under inclusive contestation, not identity of people and government.

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